2014

Romanticism: Philosophy And Literature

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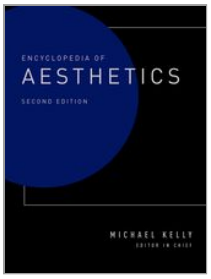

Encyclopedia of Aesthetics (2 ed.)
Edited by Michael Kelly

Publisher: Oxford University Press
Print ISBN-13: 9780199747108
Current Online Version: 2014
Print Publication Date: 2014
Published online: 2014
eISBN: 9780199747115

Romanticism.

To analyze the meaning and history of Romanticism both as a distinct period of art and as a general aesthetic category, this entry comprises three essays:

Philosophy and Literature

Visual Arts

Music

The first essay examines the philosophical roots of Romanticism and the development of Romantic literature. Because Romanticism has had different histories in the various arts, there are separate essays on the visual arts and music. For related discussions, *see* Aestheticism; Autonomy: Overview; Difficulty, Aesthetics of; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich; Kant, Immanuel; Novalis; Originality; Primitivism; Schiller, Johann Christoph Friedrich von; Schlegel, August Wilhelm von; *and* Schlegel, Karl Wilhelm Friedrich von.

Philosophy and Literature

Romanticism begins in an experience of anxiety at one's possible human unreality, an anxiety that is strongly voiced by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* and closely associated with him by his philosophical and literary successors. "How," Kant asks, "can I express my freedom and rationality, somehow lodged deep within me noumenally, in a phenomenal world ordered under physical causal laws?" "The concept of freedom is meant to actualize in the sensible world the end proposed by its laws." How? And if I can't thus actualize my freedom and rationality, what then am I? Perhaps I am capable of nothing more than the "almost savage torpor" that William Wordsworth saw in his urban countrymen ("Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," 1801). The achievement of expressive freedom, in writing and in life, is then seen as the task of humanity, as it seeks to raise itself out of mere naturalness and to achieve its vocation in culture.

As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy cogently observe, Kant's "weakening of the subject" ontologically as a being no longer present to itself in inner intuition "is accompanied by an apparently compensatory 'promotion' of the *moral subject* which … launches a variety of philosophical 'careers' " (1988). In German Idealist philosophy, the effort is to overcome various forms of division—subject-object, value-fact, freedom-nature, consciousness-the unconscious, self-other—by systematically describing a developing metaphysical order that undergirds both nature and humanity, explains the present existence of those divisions, and secures the possibility of overcoming them to achieve expressive freedom.

Romanticism, in contrast, is more self-critical in pursuing this same ambition. Romantics are characteristically more aware that their efforts at expression arise out of and remain marked by the divisions that they wish to escape. They remain in anxiety about their receptions by their audiences. Their best works—in a generalization that holds true for Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Lord Byron, Friedrich von Schiller, and Friedrich Schlegel—are characteristically either incomplete, or fragmentary, or self-critical, or finally ironic. This has led Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy to speak of a "literary absolute" that is sought and imperfectly, infinitely, enacted in their works, and it has similarly led Jerome McGann (1983) to distinguish between a doctrinal "Romantic ideology" of the overcoming of dualisms and the more troubling, more self-critical work of "Romantic poetry" that never quite accomplishes its longed-for transformations.

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Helvoetsluys; - the City of Utrecht, 64, Going to Sea, 1832 (oil on canvas), Joseph Mallord William Turner.

The wish for achieving full humanity through expressiveness, coupled with an enduring anxiety about the possibility of success, while arguably simply part of human consciousness of temporality, also arises with special intensity around 1790, in part out of occasioning social-political and scientific circumstances. The development of a widespread commercial and early industrial economy, particularly in England, in the sixty or so years before 1790 led to increased division of labor and social mobility. Writers and other artists began to make their livings, when they could, through publication, performance, and sales, rather than through patronage. The necessities of doing this, and the uncertainties of reception in a divided economy, led to increased anxiety about both the specific offices of art and the possibility of expressing humanity generally. Rather than seeing humanity expressed collectively in the partial conformity of social structures to a divinely ordained archetype, individuals began to worry about how to win their particular places in the market. As the conditions for the expression and ratification of rationality, humanity, and freedom become more uncertain and tenuous, Schiller notes the "negative results of divided labor" ("On the Aesthetic Education of Man"), and Wordsworth alludes to "a multitude of causes, unknown to former times" ("Preface") that are acting to degrade the fitness of social life for humanity.

At the same time, human beings, as a result of the seventeenth-century revolution in mathematical physics and its associated achievements in engineering, are now beginning to possess greater powers to free themselves from natural misery, and hence more scope for the expression of individual personality. There is, in 1790, no going back to any ruder, premodern state without the benefits of technology. The effort is instead to blend modern achievements with more stable simplicities, to blend what Schiller called "the naive"—the pastoral, in which mind and nature are one, often identified with the pre-Socratic Greeks—with "the sentimental," the modern realm of dividedness and self-consciousness. The movement of the imagination on the whole is forward toward synthesis, toward "something evermore about to be" (Wordsworth, *Prelude*), not backward. The French Revolution, with its ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity, is seen as an especially promising, but then desperately failed, response to these modern social conditions and plights of mind. After the September Massacres of 1792, the Terror of 1793–1794, and the growing domination of Napoleon from 1795 onward, writers increasingly turn inward in attempting to take up the Revolution's ambitions and to avoid its failures. The transfiguration of humanity comes to be posited or announced proleptically, in art or within the subject, not immediately in politics, though the difficulties of proclaiming a message that requires a new audience in order to be received lead such proclamations typically to be crossed by despair, self-doubt, or irony.

Romanticism's aims for humanity thus contrast powerfully with the ancient world's pursuit of naturalness and *eudaimonia*, with medieval Christianity's ideals of obedience, continence, and beatitude, and with the Enlightenment's commitment to scientific understanding, material improvement, and satisfaction. Instead of any of these, expressiveness, or what Wordsworth and Ralph Waldo Emerson call "Power," is the aim, wherein subjective personality and social reciprocity support one another rather than being locked in conflict. Social peace is to be won without sacrificing individuality and spontaneity.

A number of thematic and stylistic features distinguish the Romantic writing that pursues this aim from its predecessors:

1. There is a prominent retrospective stance that expresses a consciousness of fallenness or dividedness. "Was it for this … ?" Wordsworth asks about his present impotent state in the *Prelude* in undertaking to review his life; "That time is past, / And all its aching joys are now no more, / And all its dizzy raptures," he laments in "Tintern Abbey." In his 1808 "Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature"—the principal critical document on Jena Romanticism for both Madame de Staël and Coleridge, who transmitted its analyses to France and England, respectively—August Wilhelm von Schlegel remarks that "The Grecian ideal of human nature was perfect unison and proportion between all the powers—a natural harmony. The moderns, on the contrary, have arrived at the consciousness of an internal discord which renders such an ideal impossible." This consciousness of discord and division traces back to Schiller's essay "On Naive and Sentimental Poetry," and before that to Kant's remarks in his historical and anthropological essays on humanity's fitful progress through alienation. In France, it is expressed in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's opposition to the idea that the arts and civilization have led to an improvement in manners; in England, in the mythologies of loss of William Blake, Keats, and Shelley, and in Wordsworth's complaints about modern urban life.

2. In opposition to the neoclassical ideal of decorum in style aiming at pleasure, Romanticism reconceives the work of art as flowing from imagination, *poesis*, or genius, in relative freedom from rules. Wordsworth condemns "false refinement" and "what is usually called poetic diction," and he urges the merits of "prosaisms" ("Preface"). Taste is stigmatized as "a passive faculty" unable to engage with "the profound and exquisite in feeling, the lofty and universal in thought and imagination" (Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary," 1815). Instead, "Imagination … / Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps, at once, some lonely traveller" (Wordsworth, *Prelude*), is to move us, in art and in life. "Internal authority alone is decisive" in the arts, August Wilhelm von Schlegel observes, and we ought not to accord "an unlimited authority" to the ancients ("Lectures"). A marked emphasis on originality—according to Kant the "primary

property" of genius (*Critique of Judgment*)—issues in a pervasive anti-moralistic, anti-nomian stance that has led some twentieth-century critics to accuse Romantics of sentimentality, vapidity, and a cult of idle sincerity in homage to nothing. Yet, the Romantic animus against borrowing and imitativeness—"even what we borrow from others, to assume a true poetical shape, must as it were be born again within us" (August Wilhelm von Schlegel, "Lectures")—also powerfully undermines dogma and complacency, in politics, art, religion, and life. In opposition to formalisms, the decorous, and the hierarchical, Romanticism's direction of thought is generally democratic-individualist. Wordsworth's "Muse," William Hazlitt observes, "is a levelling one" ("The Spirit of the Age").

3. Seeking to avoid both materialistic-oriented naturalisms and abstract moral or religious formulas, Romanticism moves epistemologically between empiricism and rationalism. The mind is typically pictured as quickened or awakened to autonomy and self-productive power in and through its engagements with certain natural scenes, numinous places, or genius loci of sublimity or beauty. "The sentimental poet" of modernity, as Schiller puts it, "*reflects* upon the impression that objects make upon him, and only in that reflection is the emotion grounded which he himself experiences and which he excites in us" ("On Naive and Sentimental Poetry"). The mind is both receptive and active, in its engagements with nature. Ordinary experience, figured by Wordsworth as "humble and rustic life" ("Preface"), reveals itself as uncanny—both in need of and in admitting of the unleashing of as yet muted powers.

4. Where medieval Christianity sought to locate humanity cosmologically within an exterior order, Romanticism tends to find either our home or the route toward our transformation in a descent within the psyche, so much so that it is possible to speak, with Northrop Frye, of the "internalizing of reality in Romanticism proper" (1963) or the internalization of quest romance. As Geoffrey Hartman puts it, the effort is "to draw the antidote to self-consciousness," in its present alienation and dividedness, "from consciousness itself," through a movement of descent " … in such strength / Of usurpation, when the light of sense / Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed / The invisible world, doth greatness made abode, / There harbours whether we be young or old / Our destiny, our being's heart and home, / Is with infinitude, and only there" (Wordsworth, *Prelude*).

5. As a result of its political and religious antinomianism and its emphasis on the transfiguration of our condition, Romanticism reintroduces anti-classical, Augustinian themes of the existence of standing struggles within the person, between the person and society, and between opposed sectors within society. Charles Taylor notes the Romantics' "resistance to a one-dimensional picture of the human will and their recovery of the sense that good and evil are in conflict in the human breast" (1989). Instead of knowing what we want, individually or collectively, we find that our impulses are divided, polymorphous, in need of a kind of harmonization that is never wholly achieved.

6. The typical protagonist of a Romantic text is more or less a solitary—from Wordsworth's *Prelude* persona, to Shelley's Prometheus, Keats's Hyperion, and Friedrich Schlegel's Julius. Often this protagonist is locked in a struggle with chthonic forces, internal and external, in an effort to achieve free expressiveness. Often the implied author-protagonist stands somewhat outside the fragmentary work as the locus of a hazy power of assemblage and vision. Even when others are presented in Romantic narratives, they typically appear as potential members of a small band, a company apart or an intellectual-political-artistic coterie, that has lifted itself out of generalized humanity's more vulgar commercial self-stultifications. For example, some of Jane Austen's happily married pairs self-consciously stand apart in this way in her endings, at home in higher tastes and manners that are supported by economic privilege. The ordinary travails of finding a job and earning a wage are rarely presented as providing opportunities for the development of identity. The action of identity development tends to take place in mythic arenas, or in pastoral seclusion, or in conditions of economic privilege. This has led some readers to regard Romantic impulses toward rebirth in retreat as a politically escapist bourgeois indulgence. Whether this is so depends in large measure on what one makes of the presence of problems of expressiveness within many or most human lives, and on the resources for addressing those problems that one sees in the arts and in internal descent, in contrast with class- or group-based political organization.

7. In seeking to retreat from commercial, public life, and ultimately to transfigure it, Romantics often turn to various forms of the vernacular or the exotic, against the public high culture of the neoclassical period. Figures from the Arab world or the Orient appear in works of Wordsworth, Novalis, and Coleridge and are associated with archaic-visionary alternatives to Western public culture, or the Greek gods are treated as such figures of human possibility, as in Keats and Shelley. Medieval Christianity is sometimes seen as an alluring time of social harmony and meaningfulness, especially in Novalis's "Christianity or Europe." Older quest romance literary forms and figures are reconsidered and rewritten. Interest in the North and in the medieval competes with and jostles attraction to the ancients and to Latin. William Shakespeare, Aristo, and Ossian are seen as significant predecessors, Ovid much less so. As August Wilhelm von Schlegel notes:

> The word [romantic] is derived from romance—the name originally given to the languages which were formed from the mixture of the Latin and the old Teutonic dialects, in the same manner as modern civilization is the fruit of the heterogeneous union of the peculiarities of the northern nations and the fragments of antiquity; whereas the civilization of the ancients was much more of a piece.
>
> ("Lectures")

A sense of the artistic attractiveness of mixtures and liminal figures, rather than smoothness of finish, predominates. "No one," Friedrich Schlegel remarks, "can be the direct mediator for even his own spirit" ("Ideas").

8. Crossed with self-consciousness and opposed to neoclassical ideals of formal completion, many of the most important Romantic works are either unfinished or continually self-revising, including Wordsworth's *Prelude* and *The Excursion*, Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*, Keats's Hyperion poems, Shelley's "The Triumph of Life," Blake's *The Four Zoas*, and Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* and "Critical Fragments," "Athenaeum Fragments," and "Ideas," among many others. In their fragmentariness or their self-revisions, these works often seek indirectly to suggest the persistence of a poetic, self-formative power beyond or outside the work. As Friedrich Schlegel puts it:

> The romantic kind of poetry is still in a state of becoming; that, in fact, is its real essence: that it should forever be becoming and never be perfected. It can be exhausted by no theory and only a divinatory criticism would dare to try to characterize its ideal. It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free.
>
> ("Athenaeum Fragments")

Likewise Novalis: "The great mind would make of every acquaintance, every incident, the first item in an infinite series—the beginning of a never ending romance" ("Miscellaneous Writings"). Movement is all. Romantic doctrinal conclusions, when they occur, are often forced and unconvincing, unless they arrive at either irony, as in Byron, or despair, as in Coleridge.

The extent to which Romanticism has been supplanted as a form of sensibility, aspiration, and artistic expression by realism or modernism or postmodernism remains in dispute. Each of these movements takes up some aspects of the Romantic style and often in one way or another continues its tropes of rebirth and its emphasis on the movement of becoming. At the same time, however, skepticism about the accomplishment of stable and general rebirth into new life intensifies, driven by the increasing opacity and fragmentation of social life. The conditions of commerce, industry, and public life that influenced Romanticism, both forming its aspirations and setting its problems, have intensified, not disappeared, and human consciousness of temporality and wishes for rebirth and recognition have not altered structurally, even while the continuing deferral of the satisfaction of Romantic aspirations—itself noted in Romantic writing—has furthered our sense of being trapped in complexities and divided against ourselves.

The reception of Romanticism since 1988 has continued to be marked by an opposition, sometimes evident within a single work of criticism, between efforts to reclaim and further Romantic aspirations, on the one hand, and accounts of the social, cultural, and political difficulties that trouble any such efforts, on the other. Those who have identified with Romanticism's aspirations and powers have turned increasingly to German philosophy and critical theory, notably to Friedrich Schlegel and his sense of the importance of eternal agility (Manfred Frank, Andrew Bowie) and to T. W. Adorno and his elegiac sense of powers of artistic making colliding against material circumstances (Andrew Bowie, Lydia Goehr, Simon Jarvis). Those who have been troubled by the standing force of social oppositions and exclusions have, while not altogether denying Romanticism's aspirations, turned to thick accounts, in the style of cultural studies, of the social problems that Romantic aspiration inevitably encounters (Mark Canuel, Anne K. Mellor, David Simpson). Hence, the reception of Romanticism continues to work through the combination of aspiration and skepticism that itself defines Romanticism.

[*See also* Classicism; Coleridge, Samuel Taylor; Emotions; Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von; Irony; *and* Wordsworth, William.]

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